



MERCED SUN-STAR

17 killed in Florida high school shooting

BY TERRY SPENCER AND KELLI KENNEDY
Associated Press

PARKLAND, FLA.

A gunman opened fire with a semiautomatic rifle at a Florida high school Wednesday, killing at least 17 people and sending scores of students fleeing into the streets in the nation's deadliest school shooting since a gunman attacked an elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut.

The suspect was identified as Nikolas Cruz, a 19-year-old former student at the school.

The shooter, who was equipped with a gas mask and smoke grenades, set off a fire alarm to draw students out of classrooms shortly before the day ended at one of the state's largest schools, officials said. He was armed with a semi-automatic AR-15 rifle, law enforcement officers said.

Authorities offered no immediate details on Cruz or any possible motive, except to say that he had been expelled for disciplinary reasons from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, which has about 3,000 students.

Frantic parents rushed to the school to find SWAT team members and ambulances surrounding the huge campus. Live television footage showed emergency workers who appeared to be treating the wounded on sidewalks.

"It is a horrific situation," said Robert Runcie, superintendent of the school district in Parkland, about an hour's drive north of Miami. "It is a horrible day for us."

Cruz was taken into custody without a fight about an hour later in a residential neighborhood about a mile away. He had multiple magazines of ammunition, authorities said.

"It's catastrophic. There really are no words," Broward County Sheriff Scott Israel told reporters.

The attacker used the fire alarm "so the kids would come pouring out of the classrooms into the hall," Sen. Bill Nelson told CNN.

"And there the carnage began," said Nelson, who said he was briefed by the FBI.

The Florida Democrat said he did not know if the gunman used the smoke grenades, but he assumed that's why he had a gas mask on.

SEE MASS SHOOTING, 6A

Council agrees to consider bringing back park benches



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A "no camping" sign is posted at Bob Hart Square in Merced on Wednesday. On Tuesday, the City Council said it would consider bringing back benches that were removed in 2014 to discourage panhandling and homeless persons gathering in the park.

BY THADDEUS MILLER
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It's coming up on four years since the city of Merced removed several benches from Bob Hart Square to shoo away homeless people, and now the benches may be coming back.

First described as "an experiment," the 10 or so benches placed around the square have been in storage since fall of 2014. Other benches remain along Main Street.

Called the "Mayor of Downtown" by more than one councilperson, Rick McMillion brings the benches up again to the council every other month or so. He spoke to them most recently about the benches on Tuesday during a town hall-style meeting at the Multicultural Arts Center.

"How long has this experiment got to go on?" the 70-year-old said on Wednesday.

McMillion, a radio engineer, said the benches would be useful during the popular Christmas and Veterans Day parades. "I'm a disabled Vietnam veteran. There's not anywhere to sit



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down during the parade," he said. "It should be an embarrassment for the city."

During the town hall meeting this week, the City Council said they'll consider bringing the benches back. "I was shocked," he said. "Any other time I mention it, they seem like they don't want to talk about it."

The square is surrounded by businesses, including Five Ten Bistro, co-owned by Robert Matsuo. He said he has nothing against the benches. "There's good people that want to sit on the benches," he said.

The problem is they often attract homeless people and that can put a damper on the

experience of visiting his restaurant. If the benches are policed properly, he said, that would be the best-case scenario.

The restaurant's other co-owner, Mark Pernell, said when the benches were there he saw homeless people in the square all day. "Same people. Same spot. All day," he said.

The restaurant's take on lunches has also grown by five times since the benches were moved, Pernell said.

The building that holds Five Ten and other businesses is owned by the Lorenzi family, according to E.J. Almo Lorenzi. He was skeptical of allowing benches without a promise from the city for a greater police presence, adding that people are scared to visit downtown after dark.

Lorenzi, with the help of the city's now-defunct Redevelopment Agency, was involved in developing the square, he said. Lorenzi feels for homeless people who truly need help, he said, but said others "beat the system" and can cause problems in the square.

SEE BENCHES, 2A

Applications for college aid through California Dream Act are down again

By Joy Resmovits
Los Angeles Times

Each year, California invites students who are in the country without legal permission to apply for the same financial aid packages available to others. But officials once again are concerned that fears are keeping those they want to help from

seeking the funding.

The deadline to apply for aid through the California Dream Act is March 1, just about two weeks away.

As of Monday, 19,141 students had applied. That's a little more than half of last year's total.

"We're 20,000 students behind," said Lupita Cortez Alcalá, executive director of the

California Student Aid Commission, the organization that administers state financial aid.

College counselors and Cortez Alcalá cite immigrant families' increasing distrust of the government. Students are especially concerned about the fate of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, or DACA, which hangs in the balance.

"There's rumors about ICE raids all the time - some unfounded and some maybe founded," said Jane Slater, a teacher at Sequoia High School in Redwood City, Calif., who also advises a club for students who are in the country without legal permission. "The headlines about immigration make people feel like they're really in the spotlight. Kids are more afraid for their families than they are for themselves."

Some people also confuse the California Dream Act (CADA) with DACA - though Cortez Alcalá said state officials have

tried to dispel the misconception.

Still, the uncertain status of DACA may keep some students from enrolling in college, she said. DACA allows them to study and work without fear of deportation.

Aid available to students who meet certain criteria includes private scholarships funded through public universities, state administered financial aid, university grants, community college fee waivers and Cal Grants.

SEE COLLEGE AID, 3A

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